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SUBJ: LIBERALS UNDER IGNATIEFF VOW TO RAISE THEIR GAME

REF: OTTAWA 324

**¶11.** (SBU) Summary: Federal Liberals emerged from their recent convention more united, out of debt, ahead in the polls, and newly confident that they will form Canada's next government. However, the party remains far from battle-ready, despite a push from some Liberal MPs to trigger a snap election. Grassroots activists underscored the urgent need seriously to "raise our game" before any return to the polls. End summary.

**¶12.** (U) More than 2,500 federal Liberals turned out April 30 to May 3 to "pull up their sleeves," renew the Liberal Party, and "earn the trust of Canadians" at the party's biennial convention in Vancouver. Delegates confirmed Michael Ignatieff as leader of the Liberal Party by a vote of 97 pct. In post-convention interviews, Ignatieff declared his party ready and "fit to govern," pledging by June to have a policy platform that would focus on citizenship, education, help for aborigines, reform of Employment Insurance, literacy, and Canada's leadership role in the world. Delegates largely declined opportunities to "blue sky" new policy ideas, focusing instead mostly on election readiness, fundraising, and internal organization.

NO CONSENSUS ON ELECTION TIMING

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**¶13.** (SBU) Differences on election timing were evident between some Liberal MPs as well as Ottawa-based staff and activists on the ground. Some MPs claimed to be "ready to go" to the polls soon, perhaps by June. A number of young staffers in Ignatieff's Ottawa-based Opposition Leader's Office (OLO) also favored an early election. However, many activists, former candidates, and riding presidents -- especially in ridings not currently held by Liberal M.P.s -- underscored that the party was far from election-ready. One self-described "life-long" Liberal (who had worked twelve years in Ottawa in former Prime Minister Trudeau's office in the 1970s) candidly warned that "we're stony broke, and if people up in Ottawa get carried away [and trigger an election], we're in deep s--t." Some activists pointed to poor communications, lack of money, and outdated organization as evidence the party still needed significantly to "raise its game" in order to win the next election, whenever it might be.

TIME FOR CHANGE

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**¶14.** (U) In a speech to the convention, Alf Apps (who had just won by acclamation the post of the Liberal Party's new National President) acknowledged that he "got" the need for "revitalization." Reforms to fundraising and party organization had already begun before the convention, he noted. Delegates overwhelmingly endorsed a change to a one member/one vote system for electing future party leaders. Ignatieff had personally campaigned for the change, which supporters argued will be more democratic, simpler, and cheaper -- C\$10 per member, compared to C\$2,000 per member for a traditional delegated convention like this.

**¶15.** (SBU) In April, the party's "Change Commission" (initiated in late 2008) had reported that party machinery was moribund in large

areas of the country. Outgoing National President Doug Ferguson agreed that the party needed to "professionalize," advising delegates to "throw the bums out" if their local party officials underperform. Delegates griped about lack of resources, as well as the need for better communications with members beyond the national headquarters' "ka-ching" barrage of fundraising emails.

**¶16.** (U) In one workshop for approximately 100 people, one-third of participants identified themselves as new Liberal Party members. Most described themselves as previously non-political; some noted specifically that Ignatieff's leadership and/or anger over Prime Minister Harper's performance had motivated them to join the party.

#### PUTTING GAS IN THE TANK

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**¶17.** (U) As the convention opened, Elections Canada reported that the federal Liberal Party had raised C\$1.8 million in the first quarter of 2009, up C\$977,801 over donations in the first quarter of 2008. However, the total was still less than half of the C\$4.3 million that the Conservatives raised during the same period. (In 2008, the Liberals had raised a total of C\$6 million from a base of approximately 50,000 donors, far behind the C\$21 million raised by the Conservatives.) New National Director Rocco Rossi has the task of "putting gas in the tank," using state-of-the-art customized voter tracking software developed by the U.S.-based Voter Activation Network (VAN), which the Obama presidential campaign had used.

**¶18.** (SBU) Rossi specifically emphasized to delegates the need to link fundraising and membership engagement on the community development model of the Obama campaign. In workshops, delegates reacted

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positively to "Liberal 308," a new strategy to focus on all 308 national ridings, in contrast to recent campaigns that had emphasized "winnable" (mostly urban) ridings, which had left large swathes of Canada without any Liberal representation. Although a major incentive would be the C\$1.95 subsidy for every Liberal vote in an election, delegates also argued the change would be better for morale and would also help to reinforce the Liberal "brand" across the country.

#### THINKING ABOUT SUBSTANCE, A LITTLE

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**¶19.** (U) Delegates aired policy in four Policy Think Tanks: Canada and the World: Earning Our Place at the Table; The Economy, Environment and Energy; Rural Canada; and, Social Justice and Multiculturalism. Afghanistan came up only briefly, however. A majority of delegates opposed a continued combat role after 2011, although Liberal MP and National Defence Critic Denis Coderre underlined that Liberals would have to be "realistic," adding that "we are at a crossroads," with an opportunity for Canada "to make a difference" in Afghanistan. Former Foreign Minister and one-time interim Liberal leader Bill Graham warned that "the world needs Canada to play a role" and that there are "further challenges ahead," winning strong applause.

**¶10.** (U) Delegates voted on 32 prioritized -- but non-binding -- policy resolutions on a range of topics, including calls for:

-- the government "actively and aggressively" to assert Canada's northern sovereignty and expand its military capacity in the North;

-- establishment of a National Water Strategy, a ban on bulk water exports, and talks with the U.S. and Mexico to exclude water from NAFTA; and,

-- consideration of a carbon tax (a reprise of Stephane Dion's "Green Shift" that Ignatieff had already disavowed in favor of a cap-and-trade system).

**¶11.** (SBU) With respect to Canada-U.S. relations, Graham also noted

that the "U.S. has a President who thinks the way we do about the world" and argued that "this is a chance to work with it." A number of delegates cited in private conversations "synergy" between the new U.S. administration and a future Liberal government. An enthusiastic crowd cheered five images of Ignatieff with President Obama during his visit to Ottawa in February as part of a video backdrop to Ignatieff's keynote speech to the Convention.

GOOD NEWS FROM THE POLLS

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**¶12.** (SBU) A recent Canadian Press Harris-Decima survey put Liberal support at 34 pct nationally, up eight pct since October, with support for the Conservatives only 29 pct, down eight points. The Liberals made notable gains in Quebec, specifically to the detriment of the Conservatives, while drawing from the New Democratic Party's support in Ontario. Notable were gains among female voters. In a separate Ipsos Reid poll, the Liberals had a 36 pct to 33 pct lead over the Conservatives. However, fifty-five pct of respondents in the Ipsos-Reid poll said that the Liberals were not yet ready to govern, and seventy-two pct did not want the opposition to trigger an election any time soon.

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